



(Im)possible leadership

by Louise Merlihan

Sometimes we can become stuck or feel burdened in our work. Here are strategies for managing emotions and moving forward in difficult times.

We come to the work of community change with full hearts and good intentions. As leaders of change initiatives or organizations, we seek to make a difference in the world – to effect change that impacts the lives of our neighbours and the future of our communities.

There are times, however, when we become stuck, paralyzed by indecision and unable to find a way forward. And it's not for lack of skill or resources. Sometimes, the fundamental question for leaders is, How do *I* do this?

Managing self: The essential role of leadership

As a leader, you manage meaning for others – offering a way to make sense of the work, how to interpret a situation, and how to react emotionally. We rely on other people for emotional stability. Because we are by nature social, we attune to the emotions of others. Consider the last big public event or festival you attended and the mood there, recall the anxiety that pervaded a substantial change you were instituting, or the joy and happiness that radiated at a wedding you attended – the emotions in those spaces were writ large by the sheer number of people experiencing them.

It's critical that you set an emotional tone that says this work of community change is possible. That is difficult to do when you can not see the way forward yourself.

Distress erodes our mental abilities and decreases emotional intelligence. When we are upset, we have trouble reading emotions accurately in others, which decreases our empathy and impairs our social skills.

Every feeling is a multi-layered experience. When an emotional chord is struck, it stirs past memories of the same feeling. If, for instance, you feel anxious, you are not just anxious in that moment, you are remembering anxiety from other times in your life. Powerful emotions can also block out others, meaning that when we experience a particularly strong emotion, such as anxiety, it can be difficult to access joy.

This is where self-awareness is so important. Self-awareness is the ability to identify feelings, thoughts, values, and wants and put them into words. It is the ability to observe yourself in the moment, reflect on the source of your reactions, and move to an

The fundamental question for leaders is, How do *I* do this?

informed choice about how to step forward. The key is to be conscious about what is happening in the moment and to separate what is past (implicit emotional experience) from what is present (what is actually occurring that you can learn from).

When you find that you are acting from emotion and feel mired in uncertainty, take a deep breath and ask yourself these questions:

- What do I feel?
- What do I think?
- What do I want?

What do I feel?

Name the emotion(s) you are experiencing. What impact is this having on you?

All emotions are essential – whether they feel good or not. They are part of the human experience and provide us with valuable information.

Building and sustaining joy is essential to getting to possible.

Fear, for instance, is one of the oldest human emotions. Its gift is protection and safety – fear tells us to pay attention. For

many, feelings of fear are often related to the fear of failure. Leaders who experience fear often work even harder to accomplish their goals and to do well. And while the gift of healthy fear promotes safety, fear can leave us feeling anxious, diminished in vitality, and immobilized.

When experiencing intense feelings of fear or anxiety, how might we move from an emotional space of “impossible” to “possible”?

One thing to do is name the emotion we are experiencing. When our feelings are intense, we often bundle several of them together. If you are feeling anxious, notice what feelings lie beneath it. Stress and uneasiness can be generated by feelings of inadequacy, and helplessness. Practice identifying and naming the underlying emotions to quieten their impact upon you:

- Notice patterns in different contexts in your daily life. For instance, do you feel hopeful and optimistic at the beginning of the day? Do days of meetings leave you energized or depleted?
- Notice what triggers certain emotions. What happened just prior to a feeling of unease? Make a list of these triggers to identify patterns.

- Ask those close to you how they experience you and your feelings. Sometime it is easier to identify an emotion when another names it for you.
- If you are in an intense situation and are unable to identify what you feel, notice your body. Is it tense? Are your jaw or shoulders tight? Are you slumped over? Identifying how the emotion affects your body can help you name it.

Invest in joy

When we are most ourselves we feel capable, optimistic, and resilient. With good emotional energy we experience vitality, feel confident, take risks, and recover quickly. When we are fatigued or burnt out, we become more careful in relationships and withdraw from challenge. It becomes difficult to sustain hope or see how we might move forward.

Building and sustaining joy is essential to getting to possible. Investing in joy begins with turning the focus back on ourselves and practicing self-care.

What do I think?

What assumptions, judgments, ideas are going through your mind right now? What do you know for sure? What needs to be clarified?

No one else sees the world quite as you do. Over time, your values, beliefs, and experiences shape your view of the world and yourself in it.

The mental models we construct affect what we observe, the assumptions we make, and the conclusions we draw.

Have you ever searched all over for something – like your cell phone or the ketchup in the refrigerator – only to have someone else reach around you, pick it up, and hand it to you? Psychologists call this phenomenon a “perceptual set.” It’s essentially a picture in our head of how the item should look, where it should be located, its colour, etc. When the reality does not match our perceptual set – for instance, the ketchup is on the second shelf behind the mayonnaise rather than beside the mustard – we cannot see the object.

The perceptual set we hold about ourselves as leader affects what we see is possible. We become contained by the story we have developed about our strengths, capacities, and the impact we can have on others and in the community.

To uncover the underlying assumptions and beliefs you hold about yourself as leader, reflect on these questions:

Photo: Tamarack Institute



- What is a good leader?
- What helped to shape my opinions on this?
- How do I describe myself as a leader?
- What is a key learning I have had about leadership?
Where did that come from?
- When do I know that I am being a “good leader”?
- What do I think is possible when I lead?
- What would my leadership look like if it was effortless?

What do I want?

What are your intentions, hopes, and desires?

It can feel selfish to focus on what we want, particularly for those whose work is so focused on improving conditions for others. But articulating what you want as a leader makes you aware of your own needs. And finding ways to meet them enhances your life, vitality, and productivity by spending your energy on moving forward rather than resisting.

Invent a new story

Shame and vulnerability researcher Brené Brown writes in her book *Daring Greatly* (Gotham, 2012), “What we know matters, but who we are matters more. *Being* rather than *knowing* requires showing up and letting ourselves be seen. It requires us to

dare greatly, to be vulnerable. The first step of that journey is understanding where we are, what we’re up against, and where we need to go.”

In exploring what you feel, think and want you take the first step of that journey. You uncover the emotions that drive you, reveal the story you have been telling yourself about your leadership, and move forward by articulating what you want.

And since the story you have been holding about yourself as leader is one you have invented, you can create a new story, one which sees your leadership support the improbable to become the inevitable. A story where your leadership says, I’m Possible.

Louise Merlihan is Tamarack’s current director of engagement and has a passion for leadership coaching and personal growth that leads to engagement and collaboration. Possible starts with personal transformation that provokes people to engage their communities to consciously learn and change together. Reach Louise at louise@tamarackcommunity.ca. //

It can feel selfish to focus on what we want.